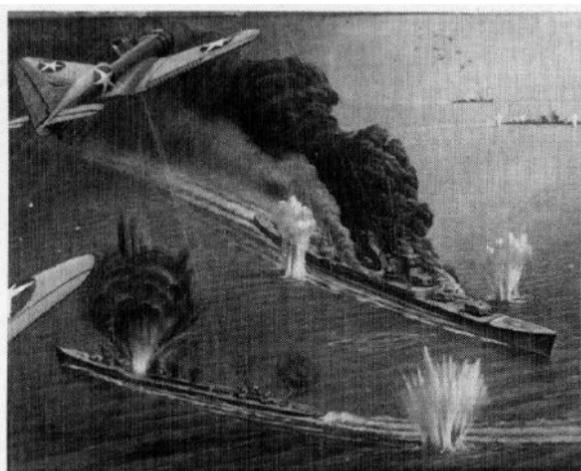




Combat Art in WW II

By Cdr. Peter Mersky, USNR



Top: "Attack on Japanese cruisers Mogami and Makuma," Griffith Bailey Coale (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). Action at Midway, portrayed by the man credited with starting the Navy's combat art program. Slender fingers of flak reach for SBD Dauntlesses as they swoop over enemy ships. Coale liked to paint wide panoramic scenes of battles. Above: "PBY - Umnak," William F. Draper (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). Its crew prepares this PBY Catalina for a patrol, fighting a driving wind and blowing snow. One of the original five Navy combat artists, Draper joined the Naval Reserve in 1942 and traveled throughout the Pacific.

Combat art has been around for as long as history can recall. Cave paintings, tapestries, and murals have all shown man in military encounters. By 1860, the camera had begun recording historical events. Civil War photographer Matthew Brady's work is probably the first major use of the new medium in military operations. As powerful as Brady's photos were, there was still room for the correspondent-illustrator - personified by the young painter Winslow Homer, who later became one of America's premier marine and watercolor artists.

During WW I, artists visited the various fronts, creating colorful, yet emotionally dark images. One man who broke new ground was Henri Farre, who, at 43, returned to his native France in 1914 to fight. He became an aerial observer and flew many combat missions. He also became the first aviation combat artist, recording his own experiences and those of his compatriots on 170 canvases.

When a second conflict plunged the world into war again in 1939, artists on both sides quickly applied themselves to the effort of showing the people at home what was happening. America's entry into the war in 1941 presented a great opportunity for the graphic presentation of the conflict.

Britain, Germany, Italy, and Japan also had their own programs, many examples of which survived the war. Some of the Axis paintings were collected by the U.S. Army and the new U.S. Air Force; a few can be seen on the walls of the Pentagon, especially German war art. Japanese art seems to have been hidden away. Reports of displays in museums in the

country have apparently been without foundation. Fortunately, a few reproductions of Japanese art are part of American service collections.

American combat artists had the entire world from which to choose subjects. Some specialized in one or two theaters, or categories. It was easier to ride aboard a cruiser or destroyer, or even a landing craft, than in a combat airplane where seating was limited. Thus, many combat artists painted life onboard ship, or ashore, relying on interviews and media accounts of air combat for aerial action. Several artists tried their hand at showing surface ships under attack, defending themselves with walls of antiaircraft fire.

Most combat art shows aircraft on the ground, being serviced or perhaps returning from a mission. Artists also illustrated airmen - looking upon combat pilots dressed in flight suits and parachute harnesses, cloth flying helmets and goggles perched nonchalantly on their heads or hanging from their hands - as modern-day Davids.

Campaigns were noteworthy, but single aerial engagements were hard to authenticate due to wartime security. Thus, a difference between today's meticulously rendered reconstructions of aerial battles and the combat art of the 1940s is that while both artists show action, the earlier effort is usually on a wider scale; modern work focuses on a portion of the same action.

The Army's ambitious combat art pro-

"Wind 'Er Up!" Georges Schreiber (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). The student aviator waits as his plane captain helps start his Stearman trainer. It took a lot of muscle to crank the plane's inertia starter. Belgian-born Schreiber's paintings were for the Abbott Collection.



gram – officially part of the Corps of Engineers – ran up against congressional indifference after only four months. By mid-1943, 23 military and 19 civilian artists were serving on 12 fronts. When the program was dissolved, 17 artists were commissioned by *Life* magazine to continue their work, at the publisher's expense.

In the same spirit, Abbott Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company in Chicago, recruited 12 well-known American painters to tell the public the war's story through their paintings and drawings.

Vice Admiral John F. McCain, then-Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air), described these artists' contributions in



"Fighter in the Sky," Tom Lea (U.S. Army Center of Military History). One of the few examples of combat art that shows an actual engagement, this Grumman Wildcat pilot is framed in his cockpit, with the canopy back and the dorsal area damaged by enemy gunfire. The young aviator has been successful three times before as shown by the Japanese "kill" flags below his cockpit. Texan Tom Lea was one of the *Life* artists. An illustrator before the war, he served in the Pacific and saw action at Peleliu.



"Aviators Debriefing," Alex Raymond (Marine Corps Historical Center). A returning squadron of aviators recounts their mission to the intelligence officer using the common hand language of flyers. Commissioned and rising to major, Raymond created "Flash Gordon," a popular futuristic comic strip before the war.

depicting Naval Aviation: "They covered all phases of the program, from Pre-Flight School up to combat. There are pictures of pilots, enlisted men, and Waves, and of virtually all the Navy's planes.... The oils, watercolors, drawings, and sketches ... provide a spirited chronicle of the Navy in the air."

The Navy, however, wanted its own corps of artists, but didn't want to run into trouble like the Army. Thus, records dealing with the formation of the sea service's artist brigade are sketchy at best.

Griffith Bailey Coale of Baltimore, Md., is credited with starting the Navy's combat art program in 1941, just before Pearl Harbor, to show "neutral" America's defense of its sea lanes and aid to its struggling allies in Europe. Commissioned as a lieutenant commander, Coale sold the Navy on bringing in other talented artists as commissioned officers – along with a few enlisted members – to form the Navy Combat Artist Corps. Eventually, 11 men toured the combat fronts throughout the world to paint the Navy in action. Often, these men saw action alongside their more traditional warrior counterparts.

The Marine Corps also had a small cadre of artists, but ruled that every man

Naval Aviation in WW I



"The Kill," Robert Benny (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). Benny was a successful painter before the war. His view of a Grumman Avenger attacking a German U-boat was done for the Abbott Collection. The big torpedo



"View From the Tower," Paul Sample (U.S. Army Center of Military History). Kentucky-born Sample served during WW I. He was commissioned by *Life* in Spring 1941 to chronicle America's preparation for war, and after Pearl Harbor to show Naval Aviation in action. He spent time ashore around air stations.



bomber's bay doors are open as it finishes its run. Flying from numerous CVEs, Avengers and Wildcats made a formidable team by 1944 that finished off many of Hitler's submarines.

was first and foremost a Marine and, therefore, had to graduate from boot camp. The tough training was hard on some of the older artists, but most made it through and were assigned as enlisted members of various units. Some managed to gain commissions by the end of the war.

The Navy's Office of Public Relations administered the combat art program and the paintings and drawings produced by roving combat artists, allowing newspapers, magazines, and book publishers to present these eyewitness depictions of the Navy in action to the American public.

Things didn't always go smoothly, however. Lieutenant (jg) William F. Draper's first assignment was in the Aleutians, a scene of bloody fighting between Japanese invaders and American defenders and the only sustained combat action in the western hemisphere.

Draper arrived to find that no one knew he was coming, or what he would be doing. When he asked to see the base commander, he was refused. Undaunted, the young artist began painting what turned out to be one of the most sensitive areas in the camp, the command and control building. He was immediately

apprehended by the base security police and taken to the CO.

During an inspection tour of the base, Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, sat for his portrait. He became interested in the combat art program and asked Ltjg. Draper what he could do to help further its success. It was a golden opportunity. "I need to know when and where things are going to happen so that I can be there to paint them," Draper said.

The admiral thought for a moment and then took the artist aside to a secure area to lay out the entire Pacific island-hopping campaign for the astonished Draper. Even-



"At the Edge of Henderson Field," Hugh Laidman (Marine Corps Historical Center). This watercolor shows an SBD at Guadalcanal. Sgt. Laidman (later commissioned) was one of the Marine Corps' combat artists. He created watercolors and drawings on the Solomons Campaign.



"Marine Aviator," Kerr Eby (Marine Corps Historical Center). Tired and bedraggled, this young Marine fighter pilot thinks about his next mission. Eby was a sergeant in WW I and served through WW II as a civilian combat artist covering the Pacific. His fine charcoal scenes of Marine aviators and ground crews convey the harsh living conditions and spirit of these front-line servicemen.

Naval Aviation in WW II

tually, Draper toured the Pacific, seeing action during the bloody invasion of Tarawa, although he did not, thankfully, ride in with the first wave of Marines.

Naval Aviation was perhaps the area that was the most difficult to experience for the artists, especially in a combat theater. Besides the obvious danger, space was limited in a combat aircraft; every crewman had to have a reason to be there. That's why many of the examples of artwork depicting aviation themes are somewhat benign, or shown in a narrative, third-person manner. The artist could not have been personally

involved in the engagements he showed. A few exceptions were scenes of aircraft carrier flight decks and lighter-than-air crews.

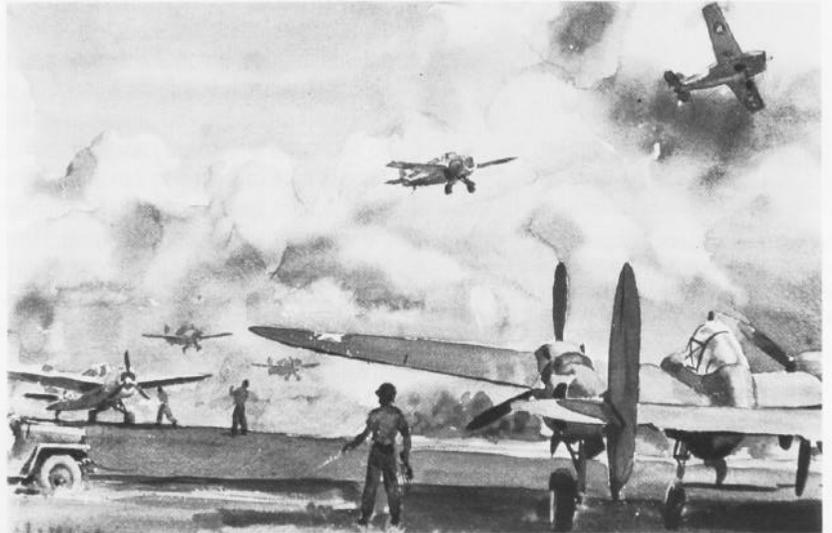
Although the war's art program ended by 1946, the Navy continued recalling artists to record specific events, as well as future conflicts. The other military services also keep a corps of artists on call, as seen by some of the fine work done in the Persian Gulf.

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"Fighter Scramble, Guadalcanal," Dwight Shepler (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). A watercolor showing Grumman Wildcats launching to intercept Japanese raiders in late 1942; a P-38 in foreground. Shepler joined the Naval Reserve in May 1942 as a combat artist, seeing action in the South Pacific, at Guadalcanal, and in Europe at Normandy.

Below: "Plane Handlers Stacking the Planes," Tom Lea (U.S. Army Center of Military History). Excitement on a carrier flight deck as the crews strain to position aircraft away from the landing area as a recovery begins. Bottom: "Corsairs Fringe Fuji," Standish Backus (U.S. Navy Combat Art Collection). By 1945, Navy and Marine Corps fighters roamed almost at will over Japan. These Navy F4Us are passing one of the most important symbols of Japan, Mt. Fuji. Backus did not join the Navy combat art program until late in the war. He served in the Pacific, recording many 1945 milestones, including the Japanese surrender.



Combat Art of other Nations

Wartime art was not limited to the U.S. Every combatant had some form of program, although few details are available for the Axis countries. Germany had a wide-ranging program, and a lot of Nazi paintings and drawings were captured by various Allied units. The Army and Air Force had a considerable number of German works brought to America and occasionally display the pieces, especially in the Pentagon.

Adolph Hitler established the German war art program in 1941. A frustrated artist, Hitler probably fancied himself a patron, and after seeing paintings by soldiers, he decided to memorialize the achievements of his *Wermacht*.

Although much of Hitler's combat artwork was used for propaganda purposes, there was much to commend it. Indeed, if it were not for the horrible political organization they represented, German combat artists might be seen in the same light as many of the Allied artists.

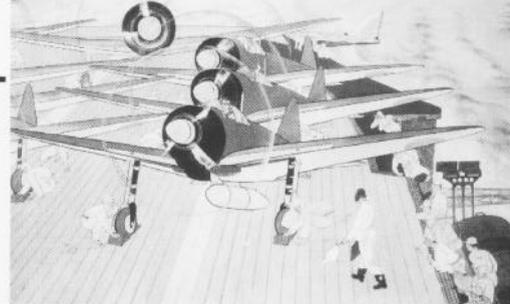
Italy and Russia also had corps of artists, as did Japan. The U.S. Air Force accumulated a wealth of Japanese combat art, although there is very little information on the Empire's program. The Japanese sent photographers and correspondents to the various fronts, but no one seems to recall specific artists. However, there's no denying the large number of high-quality paintings and drawings that show the Emperor's soldiers and airmen at work.

Britain, Australia, and New Zealand

had many fine prewar artists who went to work for the war effort. Today, Frank Wooten is probably the best known of these combat artists. He spent many long hours in the field sketching and painting aircraft and flight crews of the Royal Air Force and associated Commonwealth forces. Muirhead Bone was an older artist who had also produced work during WW I. He was knighted in 1937 in honor of his lifelong achievements, which included establishing a long-term relationship with the Imperial War Museum and a fund that enabled the museum to purchase works of new artists. His son, Stephen, was also an active artist during WW II.

Young Richard Eurich presented himself to the War Artists Advisory Committee in June 1941, writing, "Now the epic subject I have been waiting for has taken place. The Dunkirk episode. This surely should be painted and I am wondering if I would be considered for the job!" The British withdrawal from Europe at the beaches of Dunkirk, France, in May 1940, set the stage for the epic Battle of Britain, as Germany prepared to sweep across the English Channel and claim Britain as part of the Third Reich. Eurich painted several striking canvases, some with unique vantage points and close-valued, vibrant colors.

Another British artist was Leonard Rosoman, whose impressionistic, graphic style showed everything from Londoners fighting fires during the 1941 Blitz to Royal Navy *Corsairs* on a carrier flight deck.



Top: A well-known piece of Japanese wartime art, this watercolor by Arai Shori shows Zero pilots aboard one of the carriers headed for Pearl Harbor in December 1941 (U.S. Air Force Art Collection). **Middle:** Artist Jun-Ichi Mikuriya painted this attack by Japanese aircraft on a U.S. task force (U.S. Air Force Art Collection). **Above:** "HMS Illustrious Entering the Basin at John Brown's Shipyards, 1940," Sir Muirhead Bone (Imperial War Museum). Aircraft from Illustrious participated in the British attack on the Italian base at Taranto in 1940, which many believe gave the Japanese the idea for their attack a year later on Pearl Harbor. Bone was an accomplished draftsman whose career spanned both world wars. He seemed to prefer drawing in pencil and pen and ink.

50 Years Ago — WW II

May 11-30: Occupation of Attu – Air support for the landing of Army troops (May 11) and for their operations ashore was provided by Navy and Marine units on the escort carrier *Nassau* (May 11-20), and by the Navy and Army units of the North Pacific Force (May 11-20). This was the first use of CVE-based aircraft in air support in the Pacific and the debut of a Support Air Commander afloat. His team consisted of three officers and a radioman; his post was a card table aboard *Pennsylvania*. Col. W. O. Eareckson, USA, an experienced Aleutian pilot, commanded the unit.

May 22: Grumman *Avengers* of VC-9, based on *Bogue*, attacked and sank the submarine U-569 in the middle north Atlantic, scoring the first sinking of the war by escort carriers on hunter-killer patrol.

Jun 7: The Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, established a project for airborne test, by Commander Fleet Air, West Coast, of high velocity, "forward shooting" rockets. The results of these tests were so favorable that operational squadrons in both the Atlantic and Pacific fleets were equipped with forward-firing rockets before year's end.

Jun 28: A change in the design of the National Star Insignia added white rectangles on the left and right sides of the blue circular field to form a horizontal bar, and a red border stripe around the entire design. The following September, Insignia Blue was substituted for the red.

Jun 29: Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Md., began functioning as an aircraft test organization with the arrival of the Flight Test unit from NAS Anacostia, D.C.